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THE PERMANENT VALUE OF THE BIBLE

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The study of comparative religion has introduced great confusion into our conception of inspiration. Martineau complained that some of the Calvinists, with their finished definitions of God, left us without "the sense of a shoreless sea," and gave us "a port of traffic, with coast-lights instead of stars."¹ There are many in our day who complain that we have nothing left but distant stars and a shoreless sea. They would be glad of a little glimmer on the shore of something, to indicate that their storm-tossed bark was approaching a substantial truth. There is a vagueness about the thought of universal inspiration. If all men are under the tutelage and instruction of the Spirit of God, where do we get our standard of valuation? Granted that the Bible is only one of many inspired books, what will be its ultimate place in our religious devotions and instruction? Is it any longer a source of authority? Indeed, what is authority? The questions press upon us so fast that they leave us dazed and in doubt.

In the first place we must remember that this idea of the universality of inspiration is not an entirely new thought. If we turn to the early apologists, we find that Christianity entered upon her period of expansion in the second century in the spirit of the words, "As certain also of your own poets have said." To Justin Martyr the Stoics, the poets of Greece, the disciples of Plato, and many others all spake under the inspiration of the "Word."² To Clement of Alexandria the great Greeks had "torn off a fragment of eternal truth from the theology of the ever-living word."³ He calls their philosophy "a covenant peculiar to them."⁴ This thought is coming to the front once more. To all who believe in one Spirit, inspiration must be one. The Bible cannot differ from those disclosures of himself which God has made to all spiritual heroes, moral pioneers, benefactors of humanity, defenders of the right, whose sayings and doings we find

¹ *Studies of Christianity*, p. 149.

² *Apology*, ii, 10.

³ *Stromata*, i, 13.

⁴ *Ibid*, vi, 8.

scattered through all ages and lands. Wherever a noble thought is to be gleaned, wherever a spiritual experience is to be found, wherever our hearts are thrilled by a splendid example of moral triumph, there is a real manifestation of the Spirit of God. In word of wisdom, in heroic precept, in exalted ideal, he comes to us in that unveiling which we call "revelation." We can find him in the *Analects* of Confucius. We can hear his voice speaking to us in the *Koran*. We can see his power in the example of Socrates.

Take the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Some of the precepts therein contained are of a very high order.

I have caused pain to no man.
 I have suffered no one to hunger.
 I have caused no one to weep.
 I have gained my possessions by righteous means.
 I have not falsified the measure of corn.
 I have been a father to the orphan.
 I have been a husband to the widow, a shelter to the freezing.

Despite the admixture of many puerile and formal virtues in this list of the soul standing before the judgment-seat of Horus and Anubis, and despite the fact that the catalogue is only the 125th chapter of a very dreary and barren book, the candid reader cannot fail to find here very noble examples of the effort of our humanity to commend itself to God by purity of character, and sincerity of act.

Similar examples could easily be obtained from the Chinese *Tao-ti-king*, from the *Upanishads*, from the *Zend-Avesta*, and from other sacred books. The prayer of Priam at the knees of Achilles, in Homer, is a strong and inspiring appeal. Some of the hymns to Apollo are surpassingly beautiful. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles contains passages of moral majesty and power. So we might go on. In the end the only conclusion we could reach would be that with which we began, namely that the Bible does not differ from other sacred books if we start with an abstract conception of inspiration.

Instantly someone asks, "If this is true, why not form a Bible from that which is best in the literature of all lands and ages?" This is a question that has often been asked. The answer to it is very simple and practical. Who shall form such a book? What shall be his principle of selection? The moment we seriously attempt to answer these questions we confront a situation. The man, or the committee,

who gives us the new Bible, must be inspired. Failing to find infallibility in the religious enthusiasm of the past, we try to locate it in the scientific spirit of the present. Either this, or we must dissociate the two ideas of inspiration and infallibility. As a matter of fact every religious teacher is continually forming such a Bible for himself. To the extent of his knowledge, he draws on the inspiration of the ages. Whenever a preacher exalts the devotion of a missionary, quotes a saying of Kant, appeals to the sacrifice of a martyr, or praises the discovery of a scientist, he is using the idea of inspiration in its large and liberal sense. For this no complete and finished textbook can be furnished him. He must make that for himself. As he reads it will be an ever-enlarging Bible, from which he draws his inspiration. If he is a free man, he will resent the intrusion that would brush aside his personality, and turn over to a committee of scientists the selection of his sacred literature.

All this, however, leaves us where we began. The reason for this is that our approach to the problem has been from the abstract end. We have been dealing with a conception of inspiration. Suppose we take up the matter in the concrete. Let us begin with the Bible itself, and not with a theory about it. At once we begin to see light. The fact that the so-called Proverbs of Solomon are to be put in the same category as the maxims of Benjamin Franklin, or that the epistles of Paul are to be regarded as inspired in the same way as the Journal of Amiel, does not reduce them all to an absolute level of moral value and spiritual power. The fact that we believe nothing merely because we find it in the Bible, but because it commands our conscience, revives our hopes, strengthens our resolves, and inspires us to virtuous action, does not lessen its spiritual significance, if it really accomplishes these things. The question is, therefore, whether the Bible is separated from other books by its power to do this. Those timid Christians who fear such a comparison have little trust in the inspired message of their Scriptures.

Professor Max Müller, in editing the sacred books of the East, was compelled to omit portions too shameful to bear publication. No man could print them, he declared, and escape prosecution. There are also gross passages in the Bible. If it were a new book, could we print them? There are barren passages, genealogies and rites, laws

of sacrifice, and descriptions of temple furnishings, that are of no religious value in the present day. All this we may grant, and still a slight comparison with other sacred books will reveal wherein the difference lies. We call the plains of Arabia "a desert," despite the fact that an occasional spring forms an oasis there. We call the state of New Jersey "a cultivated region," despite the fact that there are certain sandy sections where nothing can grow. Are we not a little too finical about speaking of the supreme revelation of the Bible?

Again let us say that other literature is inspired. Who can read the hymns of Ikhnaton, king of Egypt, in praise of the glories of nature, and the God who dwells in his breast, and not feel, despite the fact that he lived thirteen centuries before Christ, that his soul received a true revelation from the Infinite?⁵ Shall we, for this reason, fear a comparison between them and the Psalms? What is there in them, for moral elevation and devotional grandeur, to equal passage after passage, in luxuriance of spiritual beauty, describing a God whose glory "the heavens declare," who made us "a little lower than the divinities," who is "our light and our salvation," who "forgiveth our iniquities," who "pitieth us, as a father pitieth his children?" It is simply that we have to seek the choice passages in other literature, and in the Psalms we have to seek the vindictive and imprecatory passages.

We confuse the whole matter by considering it in the abstract. We ask whether the difference between the revelation in the Bible and that in other books is one of "kind" or "degree," without seeing that under certain circumstances the two are one. The difference between the temperature of Alaska and Brazil is merely a matter of "degree." If we think of their productiveness, however, the two regions differ in "kind." The fact is that such a distinction is utterly illogical, when applied to the Bible, because the two ideas start from totally different premises. If two men argue on inspiration, one starting from the thought of the unity of the Spirit of God, and the other starting from the thought of the religious and moral value of the Bible, the first asserting that the Bible is not different from other books, and the second declaring that it is the only book in the world, they may argue forever, for the reason that both are right.

Our confusion arises from the peculiar nature of moral and spiritual

⁵ See Breasted, *A History of Egypt*, chap. xviii.

values. They are absolute. They are not measured in inches. We do not estimate spiritual gifts as we put a price-tag on a commodity in a shop. Anything that is morally or spiritually higher than another has a finality about it that commands us with the very voice of God. Who can picture the Huguenots, shut up in La Rochelle, deriving their inspiration from the pages of Herodotus? Who can imagine Plutarch's *Morals* lying at the side of one of Cromwell's Ironsides, as he went to sleep on the straw? Who can fancy Seneca's essay on "Benefits" furnishing the inspiration of a "Cotter's Saturday Night"? There is a sublimity that rises to moral majesty in the words of Epictetus on "Freedom," but by no stretch of the imagination can I see that treatise hidden in the cell of those gaunt prisoners who were shut up in the "Tour de Constance." I can understand the spirit in which Dorothea Dix liberated the insane from their chains, and turned the madhouse from a place of torture into a place of healing, but I cannot understand the man who fancies that Plato's *Banquet*, or the ethics of Aristotle, could furnish the inspiration for such an act. Rather do I confess myself, with Huxley, to be greatly perplexed "to know by what means the religious feeling, which is the essential basis of conduct, is to be kept up, in the present utterly chaotic state of opinion, without the use of the Bible."⁶

We here touch the secret of the permanent value of the Bible. "The pagan moralists," says Huxley in the same passage, "lack life and color, and even the noble Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, is too high and refined for an average child." How naïve is such a statement! Did Huxley never consider the difference between the spiritual dynamic contained in examples of moral heroism, and collections of moral precepts? If we consider this we are all children. Even the philosopher, if he stops to consider long enough, will hesitate to use the words, "high and refined," in such a comparison. The fact is that Huxley is here confused by the lack of a standard of valuation. This makes his vision too narrow, despite his efforts at fairness. "Consider," he cries, "the great historical fact that for three centuries this book has been woven into the life of all that is best and noblest in English history." Why English history? Why limit the time to three centuries? When Jesus purified the temple did he not draw his

⁶ *Collected Essays*, III, p. 397.

inspiration from Jeremiah? Whence came the enthusiasm that ministered to the dying, during the great pestilence in Alexandria in the third century? What led Saint Ovidius to emancipate over five thousand slaves? From the pages of the Bible there has come a power that has molded the thought, elevated the ideals, healed the miseries, enlightened the purposes, and transfigured the ambitions of men, through a period of time and over an area of earth that the thoughtful student hesitates to fix.

It is a strange spirit that fears a comparison of this book with other literature. Even the imperfections of its science are couched in terms of beauty, if we consider the age that produced them. Compare the nineteenth psalm, whose sun is like a bridegroom, and whose heavens "declare the glory of God," with the Egyptian conception of a vast cow, standing athwart the sky, whose head is in the west, and whose body covers the land of the Nile. Or turn to Greece. The Bible has lyrics as sweet as those of Pindar, but not in celebration of the victors in athletic games. Their themes touch problems of spiritual darkness and moral conquest. Is any oration by Demosthenes superior to the reported address of Paul on Mars Hill? What passage in Plutarch's *Lives* is as inspiring as the eleventh chapter of Hebrews? What lines of Aeschylus can compare, for ethical power and spiritual elevation, with the hymn to Love in the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians? The question is not one of form, but of content. The literature of Greece, despite its artistic beauty, is mostly local, particular, entangled in trivial subjects, lacking in spiritual power, limited to passing events. The literature of the Bible, despite its many imperfections, is general, suffused with moral passion, filled with a universal interest, governed by ideals of righteousness, inspired by the purposes of God.

We do not need a doctrine of "inspiration" to establish this fact. The fact gives rise to the doctrine. The latter may change, but the former belongs to the eternal. There was a tradition that the bees of Hymettus settled on the lips of the child Plato, while he slept. To deny this tradition does not remove all power and charm from the pages of the *Republic*. Why do we imagine that the superiority of the Bible is the outcome of a theory of inspiration? Why do we allow ourselves to fear, or to hope, that the departure of a mythical con-

ception of its origin will remove it from its majestic position in human affairs and purposes? It has gained that place, not by a theory, but by its own inherent value. It has been the dynamic of projects of philanthropy. It has been the sword of the spirit, in battles of purity. It has turned the prison cell into a place of triumph. Its words are woven into our ceremonies of marriage, and are heard at the last sad rites of our dead. It has created the dreams of the reformer. It has roused men to great movements of liberty by its clarion call. Like a light in the darkness, its words have been the hope of many a wanderer in the night of sin. A new theory of its origin no more affects these things than the doctrine of evolution interferes with the processes of the sun.

The commanding authority of the Bible rests entirely in its moral and devotional influence. This influence is often unconsciously recognized by the very men who have freed themselves most completely from the old idea of its inspiration. A recent biographer of Matthew Arnold says that in reading this writer we come to look inevitably for the appropriate biblical passage. "It figures alike in theological discourse and political tractate, in critical essay and school report, and not unseldom he relied upon an attractive text to cover the deficiencies of an argument that otherwise might have failed to impress."⁷ That Matthew Arnold inherited this tendency to misuse the Bible no one can doubt, but the fact itself is significant. As an aid in a campaign of righteousness its place cannot be supplied. It teaches the ultimate ruin of all moral impurity with the grandeur of Aeschylus, but without the dark view of destiny that overshadows the lines of the latter. Said Garibaldi, "The best of all allies you can procure for us is the Bible." Who can picture its influence? It has been the torch of the human conscience through the darkness of temptation. It has been the bread of the human soul when faint with grief and doubt.

Strange is the situation that confronts us! There was a people in olden times who lived in the miraculous. They evoked the dead, listened to the sound of the wind in the foliage of the trees, and heard the voice of God in the echoes of the thunder. Amid all this they grasped certain great principles concerning theft, false witness, covet-

⁷ Dawson, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 33.

ousness, murder, and adultery. They believed that the affairs of earth were working out principles of righteousness. They believed there was coming a great kingdom of purity and love. Nearly two millennia later there came another race. They looked back, and saw in the dreams of the earlier people a poetic and childlike interpretation of natural phenomena. When they made this discovery they began to lose confidence in the permanence of the moral and spiritual values of the earlier people, in the sanctity of life, in the virtue of truthfulness, in the beauty of personal purity, in the persistence of principles of right, in the coming of a kingdom of God. Is this the situation? Have we grown so wise that we cannot go back and sit at the feet of the children and learn these eternal lessons? To be sure the children believed that God wrote some of these things, with his own finger, on a slab of stone. Stories of peals of thunder, echoing around a mountain, helped to convince them that the commands were divine. If we, the grown-up race, look upon these things as mere mythology, as a husk of superstition, does that mean that we have outgrown the moral background of it all? It would be a strange conclusion that led us to lose all reverence for the unfailing spiritual truthfulness of the commands themselves. It would be an astounding manifestation of wisdom, of the superiority of our knowledge, if we flung away the grain with the husk.

This leads us to the question of biblical "mythology." The word "myth" is a great temptation to the subtle Pharisaism that resides in the scientific spirit. A myth is a "wonder story." It generally embodies some spiritual ideal. This is what constitutes its attractiveness to children. It is excellent moral exercise, even for those wise people who have learned to distinguish between fact and fancy, to go back in imagination with the children, and walk the earth with heroic forms and godlike men. Amid the stress of life, challenged by its confusing problems, perplexed by its cross purposes, happy is the man who can find ideal companionship. The casuist, to whom conduct is a set of discrete acts, of piecemeal performances, of fragmentary duties, will ever be baffled by the Bible, especially if he knows that its stories are "myths." The man who is looking for a retreat, for a sacred place whose atmosphere throbs with purposes of righteousness, for a mount of unveiling that makes more clear the ideals of

gentleness and the hopes of purity, will find that its pages bring him into the very presence of God.

We have been misled by the discovery that the Bible is not the source of religion, but the particular product of the religion of a certain time and place. We have become confused by the thought that it is just a collection of literary monuments, the classic documents of a race whose genius was peculiarly religious. What of that? Do we owe no respect and devotion to an age of unusual enlightenment and splendid achievement? He who would study music will acquaint himself with the works of Bach, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Wagner. He cultivates his talent with the aid of these men. He is inspired by their themes, urged on by their genius, cheered by their triumphs. Even so the man who would advance in righteousness, or cultivate his sense of God, will seek the aid of Amos, Hosea, Jesus, and Paul. The moral fortitude of the great men of the Bible, the cry of penitence heard in the Psalms, the sublime ideal of the Sermon on the Mount, and all the pleadings for justice and heroic endeavors to be found in patriarchial story or apostolic mission, will be eagerly sought by him as an aid and inspiration to his faith.

Suppose an artist were to object to the reverence paid to Phidias and Michael Angelo, to Praxiteles and Titian. Suppose he were to say that art did not come to an end with these men, that it did not even reach a climax in their productions. Suppose he were to advance the doctrine that art involves an ideal that is progressive and unending, and that other men, in more modern times, were the ones we should call "the Masters." Would we deny this assertion? Perhaps not, but we would look upon the man as a little bizarre. We would have far more respect for the attitude of mind displayed by the great artist, who said to the writer of this article, while crossing from Alexandria to the Piræus, "I am returning to New York by way of the Parthenon."

Bernard Shaw was accused of saying that he could write better plays than Shakspeare. He replied that this was not his claim. What he said was that he had already written better plays than Shakspeare. The smile called forth by this declaration is sufficient answer. This smile is not due to a denial of the right of Mr. Shaw to produce such plays. It merely means that his judgment is one that belongs to some future century. We have decided that Shakspeare was greater

than Marlowe. We have not decided that Luther was greater than Isaiah, or Hugh Latimer than Paul. Such valuations can be left to time. In the abstract we do not deny the possibility of a better book than the Bible as an aid to devotion and an inspiration to righteousness. We merely insist that such judgments belong to the religious consciousness of the ages. Here is the problem of the permanent value of the Bible in its simplest form. Mr. Shaw ran counter to a reverence that some men would call "bibliolatry," if it were displayed toward the Bible. It was not, however, Shakspearean idolatry, but merely an inherent conviction that literary values will take care of themselves. We can believe that the Bible represents only the best literature of the time of its production, and still maintain our reverence for it, and wait for the superior to come. Moral convictions and spiritual ideals can keep their feet in the press and strife of human thought and activity. It is not necessary to deny the possibility of some future revelation, superior to the "ethical monism" of Isaiah and Jeremiah. A better attitude is to ask for it, with eager and open mind, and receive it gladly when it comes.

This brings us to the supreme reason for our belief in the permanent value of the Bible. It is founded on a further conclusion from what we have called the "absolute" nature of moral values. If the choice in an ethical alternative is between the best and the worst, then a life that follows the devious paths of human experience, without a moral lapse, can be called "final." Such a life is found in the Bible. Whether the character of Christ is the product of myth or history, or both combined, it is there. The authority of the Bible is nothing but the authority of his life. The whole book is interpreted, consciously or unconsciously, in the light of his person. This fact saves it from those imperfections, those provincialisms, those instances of local and limited goodness, which we find in other literature. No one can deny the necessity, which Plato discovered, of making goodness and righteousness concrete in a character. We have only to follow this thing historically to see the value of the Bible. The examples of the great men of the Roman republic were long used to strengthen virtue, to prompt to sacrifice, to elevate morals, to preserve patriotism. Their value, however, was chiefly national. In the Hebrew prophets we find an approach to universality. Their mono-

theism led them to the verge of an ideal as large as the human race. This expansion took place in Christianity. It was founded on the person of Christ. In him men found a completeness, a fulness of spiritual achievement, that was a finality, and so they called him "God."

Here is the value of the Bible. There are other books that drag the mask from our shams, that flay our pride, that shatter our false serenity, that uncover our idle deceits, as effectually as does the Bible. Satirists, in every age, there have been, who have flung the flashlight of scorn into the very depths of the human soul. But when this searching of conscience comes there is ever a cry for a Redeemer. Where can the sting of guilt be removed? Is there a balm anywhere for the wounds of sin? The ability to answer this question will determine the spiritual value of a book. The man who forgets this fact, or, worse still, who is ignorant of it, is unfit to form a theory of the Bible. When there comes to earth a character who solves these problems better than does Jesus, the Bible will be supplanted. Men need something more than a consciousness of their spiritual poverty. Tortured by visions of their weakness, driven to desperation by some Nemesis of wrong, they seek help, they long for the uplifting power of sympathy, they search for an ideal that shall serve as an ally in the moral conflict. This has ever been the mission of Christ. In his presence the shame of sin is conquered, the confusion of guilt vanishes, and the light of eternal goodness begins to break through the cloud.

This fact enabled Luther to arrive at something which he called a "true touchstone," in the interpretation of the Bible. "Christ is the Master," he said, "the Scriptures are the servant." Here is the secret. No revelation will adapt itself, with endless elasticity, to the altering circumstances of life, save one which embodies itself in a character that is a type of humanity, and in this sense a symbol of God. Such a character will not only force us into self-examination and humble our arrogant conceits, but will lift our vision to ideals of courage and devotion. This is just what Paul found in Christ. One who studies his epistles will find that he has no body of Christian tradition to which he appeals in unforeseen difficulties and perplexing problems. He makes no use of the words of Christ as a ground of

authority. It is the spirit of Christ that is his guide. The fact that there is such a spirit, definite, clear, inspiring, divine, and the fact that this spirit will remain whatever may be the conclusion of criticism as to the historical nature of the gospel records, is what constitutes the permanent value of the Bible.

Until a better idea of God is found than that furnished us by Christ, the Bible will remain pre-eminently "the Book." The use of the word in the singular will be justified by Luther's principle of interpretation. Each reader, in the light of the spirit of Jesus, will choose and set aside. Maxims of conduct, poems of passion, records of kings, reflections of sages, hymns of hope, flashes of spiritual biography, pastorals of oriental life, pleadings for social justice, rapt visions of a heavenly city, will all take their place before "the judgment-seat of Christ." If the reader chances, as he may, to find on its pages examples of slave morals, or sated sensuality, of crafty prudence, of bloodthirsty cruelty, of spiritual despair, he will be able rightly to estimate these things. In this way the Bible will be able to hold religion to a spiritual ideal, independent of forms and organizations, and so allow it to renew itself perpetually, unentangled in the changing factors and incidents that are the mere vehicles of progress. Amid all the maze of passing events it will keep its own peculiar character, never losing itself in the partial, and ever driving on toward "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." This will save it from those vagaries and frenzied fancies, that have ever been the ruin of every movement that has put its trust solely in direct spiritual communications. Wild schools of the prophets and mad Montanists receive a check in the presence of the sane and ethical ideal of the Christ. And yet it cannot be said that this view makes the Christian ground of authority purely objective. The unifying principle, found in the spirit of Jesus, is distinctively a subjective power. His authority consists in his ability to communicate to men a moral contagion, and to inspire them to that divine life which is in himself. He presents to them the priceless verities of God in realized form, and carries on the work of spiritual regeneration in their souls.